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ABSTRACT

One teacher's experience in developing and teaching a college-level business Spanish course is described. The discussion contains information about the choice of content, level, cultural content, and objectives, and includes examples of instructional activities and class projects. The course was designed to focus on business correspondence and communication, and class activities include specific letter-writing tasks and the reading of a variety of authentic business correspondence and documents in Spanish. The successful employment of course graduates is noted. (MSE)

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TEN YEARS OF TEACHING BUSINESS SPANISH

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TEN YEARS OF TEACHING BUSINESS SPANISH

Dr. Angelo Armendariz

This paper would like to outline the steps followed and the experience gained in ten years of teaching business Spanish so that others may benefit from that experience.

When I started working on this course, few universities had similar courses. I did not know of any. The course had been in preparation for two consecutive summers. Very often during that period of time, I doubted I would be able to come up with suitable materials, nor did I know if students would be interested in such a course.

The idea for a business Spanish course came through conversations with colleagues, as a desperate move to attract students by offering a less traditional curriculum. The first time I offered the course in the summer of 1975, only two students showed any interest, but only one showed up for the first class. It was offered as a non-credit course on a voluntary basis. The following semester, it was offered as a regular course and, to my surprise, it was full. It had an enrollment limit of 16 and it has been full every time it has been offered. Many of the students interested in a business course are students who combine business and foreign languages, but there are others too, liberal arts students who would like to improve their marketability by being able to say that they have taken a course in business Spanish, and others.

A. What to cover in a business course.

Anybody who has had anything to do with interpreting knows how frustrating this can be. The field is immense and the chances of becoming an expert in all of them is close to nil. Even within the field of Manufacturing, Banking, Investing, International Commerce, Business correspondence, contracts, travel etc. It is impossible to cover all the subjects in a single course. The teacher has to make a choice as he establishes the goals and objectives for the course.

As for me, it was clear that Business Correspondence and communications would be the range within which I would establish my goals and objectives. As I discovered later on, this was not a bad choice for, within Business Correspondence one can develop a great range of vocabulary applicable to ordering, transportation, payment terms, international money exchanges, contracts, filling out forms, etc, pratically all aspects of business.

B. Level of Business Courses.

As we will see later, many of the available textbooks try to introduce business terminology early in the language learning process, before

the students have acquired any proficiency-fluency we used to call it before-in the language. I seriously question the validity of this approach. It is my opinion that anyone trying to go into professional use of a foreign language before the basics have been mastered can at best make a fool of himself and at worst, lose millions for the companies he is supposed to help.

Any attempt to specialize the student's language use before achieving at least a high intermediate level on the proficiency scale, will end up not achieving the goals or these would have to be so low as to have no real value in the business world.

I can imagine that in some cases and for some professions such as social workers, or for the health professions as long as one does not have to deal with technical terminology, one can keep the language needs at a basic level, but this can not be true for most other professions such as police and legal work. Here a native or near native proficiency level with knowledge of specialized vocabulary is an absolute requirement.

C. Cultural Content of Spanish or Business.

A third consideration must be incorporated in all language for the profession courses: the cultural aspects of the language. Proper forms of address, normal courtesy exchanges, telphone courtesy etc. The cultural aspects of business course should never be overlooked. I, however, will not deal with this aspect of any business course except for this comments. I would not like people to think that I have forgotten them. They are important but we can not deal with them at this point.

D. Determining the objectives of the course.

As I was preparing my business course I surveyed twelve Wisconsin companies to find out what the most pressing foreign language problems were. I discovered to my surprise that most of them had none. I had come from Spain where a bilingual secretary could command as much pay as an executive, but here in the United States, people did not feel the need for knowledge of foreign languages in the professions.

Three of the companies surveyed showed an occasional need for translating services. Those were, Could Industries, Brown Company, a paper company, and a small pet company which specializes in pure bread animals. The basic need that all of them had in common was to take care of an occasional letter from customers in Latin America; translating of machine specifications for Gould Industries and to take care of a non-English speaking business man who may come to see their operations.

Armed with this limited knowledge of local business needs, I decided that letter writing was the most likely subject to provide a job for my students, and this is exactly what I set out to teach in my course. I wanted my students to be able to read and understand business letters in Spanish and to answer those letters in appropriate correct business Spanish.

I soon discovered that this is easier said than done. I soon found out that, although I had established the fifth colegue level as the most appropriate for the course, most students had great difficulty in really understanding the message in the letter. For those students to be able to express themselves in acceptable business Spanish would be almost impossible.

I decided then that the only alternative was to have the students not write, but build, a business letter using previously existing blocks of materials. I found a book that used the same method, and this gave me the reassurance I needed in order to continue my work. Armed with this knowledge, I set out to find as many Spanish letters as I could; the more difficult and complicated they were, the better.

In reading these letters, I insist upon as perfect a translation in good business English as I am capable of or the atudents are capable of. Many students find this as difficult as understanding the letters written in Spanish. My experience shows that those students who have already had a course in business communications in English have a definite advantage over the rest. We analyze each letter, each sentence in the letter, paying close attention to the ways in which the two languages differ. After a few classes, and using the examples that we have encountered in our readings, I force the students to come up with the Spanish expressions for certain English sentences.

Transparency

1. We are writing to you regarding our last order which arrived the 10th of this month.

2. IMPORTES OCCIDENTE is capable of supplying all your needs at very competitive prices.

3. As you requested, we are enclosing our most recent catalogue with the prices now in effect.

4. Our company would like to acquire the exclusive rights to your products in this country.

5. Our representative in your country will be able to provide you with all the technical information you'll need.

6. We would like to congratulate you on the opening of your new offices in town.

7. Hoping to hear from you, we remain yours truly....

As their mastery of these expressions increases, we start dealing with complete paragraphs. This is much more difficult to do and the students despair at first that they will not be able to ever produce a correct paragraph in Spanish. It is, however, not my aim to force them to learn paragraphs by memory. This would be impossible. My aim is to get them to feel comfortable with the meaning and the way in which Spanish letters are constructed. This aspect of the course takes most of our effort in the first four to six weeks of class.

This is the vocabulary-building period. The texts bring a great variety of business terminology which the students are required to assimilate.

Transparency II

Mucho agradeceré se sirva cotizarme el precio del (aceite refinado) de (primera calidad), (en envases adecuados). Sírvase indicarme, asímismo, (facilidades y condiciones de pago).

I would greatly appreciate information concerning prices and payment terms of your best-quality refined oil in suitable containers.

Nos dirigimos a ustedes para consultarle, antes de despachar su pedido ( ) del ( ) del corriente; porque los precios han sufrido una subida inesperada de un 5 por 100 después de recibida su orden.

We are writing to you in regards to your order of ( ) of ( ). There has been an unexpected increase in price of 5% which went into effect after receiving your order.

Transparency III

Mucho sentimos no poder satisfacer su demanda y ofrederle las cotizaciones ( ) que solicitó en su atenta del ...

We regret not to be able to quote prices for ( ) as you requested in your letter of ( ).

Comunicamos a usted que en el vapor,... que sale (zarpa) de ( ) con destino a ( ) el ( ), serán embarcades, consignados a su firma (nombre) los 12 cajones de repuestos para automovil que solicitaron con fecha del corriente.
Los documentos que amparan (respaldan) dicho envío han sido entregados al Banco Español de .... a los efectos del cobre de crédito documentado que ustedes abrieron a nuestro favor.

This is to inform you that on board the ship that will leave ( ) for ( ) the ( ) will be shipped under your name (your company's name) 12 boxes with automobile parts which you ordered this month. The shipping documents have been handed over to Banco Español so that payment can be made from the letter of credit you established in our favor.

Transparencia IV

Nos dirigimos a ustedes en relación con el crédito ( ) que nos fue otorgado por esa institución con fecha ( ), y cuyo vencimiento se opera el próximo (día ( ) de agosto del corriente año.

We are writing to you concerning the credit we received from your organization which expires first of August of this year.

La expansión de nuestras actividades tanto industriales como comerciales exige una disponibilidad cada vez mayor de capital circulante, a los efectos de hacer frente a los mayores consumos de materias primas y pago de sueldos y jornales.

El ajuste practicado a los precios entrará en vigor a partir del 1 del mes proximo.

Nos complace comunicarle que mantienen su vigencia los porcentajes que tenemos establecidos para los pagos al contado.

The students read eighty letters of various lengths and degree of difficulty, and numerous other texts such as contracts and other documents. The letters touch upon all kinds of subjects and provide a wealth of business terminology which would be difficult to provide in any other form.

I do not supply the students with the terminology in Spanish and English. I used to do that at first and I still do it during the first few lessons, just to show the students how it can be done. Later on, they have to do the work themselves, as we go over the material. In this way, they end up with a vocabulary list which is better suited to their own style of learning. At the end of the course and as an important part of the grade, the students will present to me the results of their efforts. I found out that this elicits better results, and greater familiarity and command of Spanish and English business terminology.

The most important aim of the course is to prepare students to deal with Spanish business letters. The small survey I conducted prior to the preparation of the course, seems to indicate that taking care of their business correspondence is their greatest need. Quite often, foreign companies write in English, but there are many who do not - the later is becoming more prevalent especially from Spanish-speaking countries. It is, however, almost impossible for a non-native to write a proper business letter. Even the native speaker needs special training and practice before being able to write good business Spanish. Therefore, I decided early that the best way for my students to produce a reasonably well written letter was to rely basically on existing phraseology and the use of complete paragraphs, which they could modify to express whatever they needed to express.

When I gave the students a letter-writing assignment, I do not want them to write an original letter, but rather to use the materials which we have studied up to that point and construct, or put together, the different elements so as to express the ideas they want to convey. This is not easy, at first, but with practice they soon realized tht it is possible. I have students confide to me that they thought they could never achieve that goal. But, as their understanding of Spanish business letters grew, as the amount of sentences and paragraphs to chose from became richer, they realized that they were making progress. Towards the end of the course, what had been a source of despair because a motive of joy. Finally, constructing a paragraph in Spanish or a full length letter was becoming a reality.

The best student I have had in this class told me one day.

> -You know, Mr. Armendáriz, I have learned more about Spanish composition in this class than I ever did in the two composition courses I took before.

I was gratified, of course, to hear that, but after thinking about it for a while, I became convinced that she was right. By forcing the students to work with ready made phraseology, they become familiar with it. Such ~~co~~structures become a habit and they get away from the straitjacket which the thought process and word sequence of our own language imposes upon all of us.

Let me outline briefly the steps we follow to achieve our goal. I will skip here the preliminaries to the course, such as, parts of the letter, forms of address, use of reference, subject, closings and format. That can be found in almost any book on the subject. I am mainly interested in explaining the process of familiarization with the text of the letter.

The first class exercises are relatively easey. The students practically have nothing else to do except writing the letter in the right form and making minor changes.

Transparency V.

1. Don Tomás Cortes Molina, de Nueva York, escribe a Industrias Zumárraga S. A., de Sansebastián, pidiendo precios para el suministro de 2. kg de pintura blanca, clase extra, envasada en latas de 20 kg. Ruegue especifiquen condiciones de pago y fecha de entrega.

2. Don Tomás Cortes Molina de Nueva York, escribe a Giotía y Cía, de Eibar (Guipuzcoa), rogando coticen sus precios más reducidos para el suministro de grapas para unir correas de transmisión.

3. Escriba a Dodegas Logroñesas, S. A., de Haro acusando recibo de su remesa de vinos de la última vendimia. Por parecerles de buena colidad desean recibir muestras de todos los vinos que producen. Indicar que los precios cotizados parecen demasiado altos; que den los precios más bajos que sea posible en vista a que están dispuestos a hacer pedidos de gran cantidad.

4. Ricardo Soriano Muñoz, de Los Angeles, escribe a Juan Rico Utrillas, de Servilla, acompañando su pedido N. 10 para servir de acuerdo con las condiciones en él indicadas. Consultar si los precios vigentes son los de la circular N. 54. En caso de ser más elevados debe avisar antes de servir el género. En esta ocasión desea hacer el pago al contado si se le hace el 2% de descuente.

The next step is expressing in Spanish some well known English phrases such as the ones we have seen earlier. From there we go into translating short paragraphs, very similar to the ones they have read in Spanish. Later I start combining the contents of two letters into one, and finally, I bring original letters in English which the students have to put in the best Spanish they can.

It is interesting to watch how their ability to put together a letter in Spanish increases. As they see that they are making progress, their confidence increases, and this in turn makes them perform better in our attempts at simultaneous translation and translations of telephone conversations.

I will only show an example of one of the most advanced letters the students have to translate. As you will see, it is not an easy letter. The translation is from one of the better students. I regret not having the first try since that would show also the mistakes that the students still make at this point. The good ones do not make many.

Transparency VI.

We are writing to you on the advice of the Columbian Consul in Madrid who has indicated your company, Comercial Importadora, as the best qualified to serve our purpose.

Tejidos Mauleón has been in existence for 30 years. It employs more than 1,000 workers and it is considered one of the most important in its field in Spain. Our fine products are well known in Spain and in some Latin American countries. We are sure that we will be able to add some variety to the textile market in Columbia.

We would like to know the conditions of the textile market in that country.

Is there a substantial national textile industry?
Which countries import textiles in Columbia?
What are the prices?
Which kinds are the most common?
What are the official government regulations regarding exterior commerce?

Please feel free to add any additional information you deam important for our orientation.

Nos dirigimos a Uds. por consejo del Cónsul de Colombia en Madrid que ha indicado que su compañia, Comercial Importadora, es la mejor- indicad para servir nuestras intenciones.

Tejidos Mauleón, que ha cumplido 30 años de establecida, emplea más de 1000 trabajadores yes considerada como una de las más importantes en su campo en España. Nuestros productos son bien conocidos en España y en varias países de La tino-america. Por lo tanto, estamos seguros que podríamos añadir variedad al mercado de textiles en Colombia.

quisieramos saber las condiciones del mercado de textiles en ese país.

1. ¿Existe una industria importante nacional de textiles?
2. ¿Qúe paises importantes importan textiles a Colombia?
3. ¿Cúales son los precios?
4. ¿Cúales son las regulaciones oficiales del gobierno con respeto al comercio exterior?
5. ¿Qué clases de textiles son lo más comunes?

Sírvanse añadir cualquier información adicional que Uds. crean importante para nuestra orientación.

Sí a Comercial Importadora le interesa, tendríamos mucho gusto en establecer negociones con el deseo que nuestras relaciones sean provechosas para ambas companías.

F. Class Projects.

As part of the course, I always have some class projects in which everybody participates. Some of these projects were:

1. Contacting Embassies.

   We wrote to the Business Attaches of Spanish-speaking embassies requesting information about regulations in their respective countries for export-import business.

2. Surveys.

   A survey of Wisconsin companies about their needs for employees with foreign language knowledge.

   The same as above, but on a wider scale. Hundred companies, nation-wide were contacted one year. The students help develop the questionnaire, write the accompanying letter and did the rest of the work. The results, hwoever, came back too late to be analyzed in the course and I only did a very superficial study of it. Thirty percent answered and of those more than half have used interpreters and bilingual secretaries in their foreign operations. Those who needed interpreters or bilingual secretaries did not use U.S. citizens but natives of the countries in which their foreign operations were located. Not a very encouraging situation.

3. Business Dialogues.

   Students working in groups, develop dialogues in English which are used to practice simultaneous translations.

4. Simultaneous Translations.

   A visiting businessman who does not speak English comes to the company.

   The students play the different roles. One acts as translator.

5. Telephone conversations.

   The same as above but through the telephone.

6. Writing business letter.

The class is divided in groups representing companies. They write letters to each other on any of the many aspects on interntional business operations.

G. Employment of Students who have taken the course.

The employment outlook ten years ago, was quite different from what it is today. In those days knowledge of a foreign language was not a sought after qualification for employment. Ten years ago nobody got a fulltime paying job in business because of language ability. Some students had some experience because they were called upon to translate a few contracts mainly for cattle sold to Mexico. Some served occasionally as interpreters. In the last years the situation has changed. A good number of my students are working at full-time jobs where Spanish is an important part of their reason for employment. One is working for Speed Queen, taking care of their international correspondence. Another took a job with a company that produces airplane parts. Two went to work for Cargil, one of them sent me some materials the company has produced in Spanish, and she is about to go to Argentina with the company.